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The problem of the high school dropout is presented. Government and mass media have investigated potential dropouts and encouraged dropouts to return to school. In recent years voluntary withdrawal of students from high school has declined from 70 percent in 1920 to 25 percent in 1960. A leveling off at 15 percent should occur by 1975.

Recurrent attributes common to high school dropouts are low school achievement, low socio-economic status, educationally disadvantaged parents, infrequent extra-curricular activities with peers, ethnic minority group affiliation, general disinterest, and marital and family disorganization.

Remediation and retraining are solutions for the dropout. Excellence should be strived for in the first three grades for the educationally disadvantaged. This early education, rather than later rehabilitation, will prepare disadvantaged students for social and educational accommodation to the rapid changes that lie ahead in urban society.

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Dropouts, automation, and the cities

MANY EDUCATORS HAVE ASSERTED that the problem of finding ways to encourage youths to complete high school is one of the most crucial current issues in American education. The message has been repeated so emphatically that government has invested in programs to rescue old dropouts and to rehabilitate potential ones. The mass media have joined in, for the most part on the basis of tax-deductible advertising, to campaign for a return to high school. Social agencies have contributed an array of diagnostic examinations, casework and groupwork services, and clinical orientations that have helped to foster an image of The Dropout as a special type of character disorder.

Is withdrawal from high school a crucial issue? What aspects of the evidence are sometimes neglected? Is The Dropout perhaps a gloss for a more fundamental policy problem—the intensifying

Dropouts, a spreading source of anxiety in urban schools and urban society, are typically considered a high school problem. But Dr. Dentler, executive officer of the new Institute of Urban Studies at Teachers College, shows that the seeds of early withdrawal from school are sown in the elementary grades. The correction of this ugly trend, when it is properly understood, clearly requires thoughtful concern throughout the school years as well as in the major councils of our industrialized cities. Drawing on material from an investigation of educational barriers to economic security, financed (Grant No. 148), by the US Social Security Administration, Dr. Dentler acknowledges the help here of Miss Mary Ellen Warshauer, a research assistant in the Institute.

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underemployment of youth? This paper explores these questions in the spirit of the policy scientist. The evidence and its interpretation are fitted to the larger forces of automation and urbanization toward the end of articulating a broader, more fundamental challenge than school withdrawal.

Neglected Evidence

An educational problem is first of all a matter of definition. Policy makers and educational practitioners concerned with school withdrawal like to fashion their rhetoric so that the extent of withdrawal seems large. They typically report that about one out of two children who begin elementary school in the United States finishes high school, and that only half of those who finish high school go on to college. On the surface, this is not too far from the facts. For every 1,000 students enrolled in fifth grade in 1951, 582 graduated from high school by 1959. And for the same cohort, 308 had entered college.

But this is only the surface. First, it is worthwhile to treat the rate of withdrawal comparatively. If we look at fifth grade cohorts from 1920 through the present, and if we plot the rate for each year, we obtain a rather smooth curve that *declines* from about 80 per cent high school withdrawal in 1920 to about 40 per cent in 1960. If we follow the line of the resulting curve, we get the definite impression that in 1975, about 30 students per 100 will fail to graduate from high school, and that this may drop to 20 per cent by the end of the century. The main historical evidence is thus a pattern of eight decades of increasing levels of school retention, with a dramatic shift from a likelihood of .80 of withdrawal from high school to a likelihood of .80 of graduation.

This is still the surface. If we carve into the dwindling fraction of those who drop out of school, we identify some sizeable groups whose characteristics are obscured by the superficial evidence. There are students who change communities and schools without adequate transmission of records. There are mortalities, severe physical disabilities, and late-blooming mental retardates, as well as youth who suffer one or another of the several types of conditions defined as emotional disturbance and delinquency. These categories are extremely difficult to locate and measure. But if we follow the lead of researchers who have struggled to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary withdrawal on these bases, the rate of school withdrawal is reduced further. Applying the crude estimates of one of the best of these studies, my inference is that voluntary withdrawal has declined from about 70 per cent in 1920 to about 25 per cent in 1960. Using this curve, the voluntary dropout rate should level off more or less permanently at about 15 per cent by 1975.[1]

Those who argue that the dropout is a major national educational problem also neglect the question of absolute numbers. For example, we are seldom reminded that the high-school-age population expanded by 500 per cent between 1920 and 1960. It will probably increase by another 400 per cent between 1960 and 1975. The historical statistics suggest that the *number* of high school dropouts has remained relatively constant. For the period 1900 to 1930, it averaged about 500 thousand a year. From 1930 to 1950, the number averaged about 600 thousand annually. Since then, the yearly crop of

[1] My data are drawn principally from tables in (6). For a careful treatment of the question of involuntary versus voluntary withdrawals, see Segal and Schwarm (5).

high school dropouts has hovered in the range of 650 thousand. This absolute increase is very slight if our baseline is the absolute number of high school age youths.

Mobility and Concern

Finally, those most concerned to promote new policies and practices for retaining youths in school tend to neglect the fluidity common to all communal, institutional, and occupational aspects of American life. We are seldom told, for example, that a dropout rate is usually based on a fifth grade cohort examined eight years later. Census data reveal the substantial number of persons attending junior high schools and high schools, especially in metropolitan communities, who are 10 to 24 years of age. There are many who remain in school but take additional years to graduate. A recent survey in Syracuse revealed, as one aspect of this neglected pattern, that 10 per cent of all 1959-1960 high school dropouts returned to school to work toward graduation within the next two years. Another 15 per cent sought further educational instruction of other sorts in the same period (*3*).

The evidence suggests that, for the individual American student, the over-all odds of graduating from high school have improved substantially during each decade. In the abstract, this reflects the evolution of an educational system that corresponds in capability to the requirements of rapid technological change and population growth. Much of the improvement has resulted from changes in school promotion policies from a rule of success or failure grade-by-grade to a practice of social or age promotion. In turn, this change in policy is perhaps the glove on the fist of state laws prohibiting "premature" withdrawal from school and, most especially, the implementation of these laws. This change in the odds of graduating may be a mixed blessing, but surely one cannot have matters both ways. A legally sanctioned system designed to keep most youths in school for the longest feasible period is bound to alienate some youths in the process.

In the sizeable literature about school dropouts, there seem to be three main genres. One is exhortative. This largest group is not worth commenting upon, as it consists mostly of articles published to enhance the careers of educator-authors. A second group consists of descriptive statistical reports about rates for regions, states, school districts, and particular communities. These would be valuable if some uniform method that was roughly valid could be developed that would allow confidence in the statements about parameters. The United States Office of Education and various agencies and institutions are now struggling to achieve this uniformity.

None of the literature is explicit about assumptions, theoretical or normative, but the third group of papers—surveys of the social and educational characteristics of alleged dropouts—offers a point of departure. The characteristics reappear with such regularity that one is invited to generalize. The evident recurrence may be spurious, however. Educational researchers may merely imitate one another's questions. Very few studies attend closely, for instance, to the characteristics of the schools or the instructional staffs which make up the context out of which the dropout emerges. Nor are social and psychological differences between hypothetical types of dropouts emphasized.

Dropouts in Profile

The recurrent attributes common to high school dropouts are easy to cata-

logue. The modal dropout is a low school achiever, usually below grade for his age. He is a member of a low-income family in which his parents have low educational attainment. And he participates infrequently in the extra-curricular life of his student peers. Some studies strain toward greater depth in tapping these attributes. Clinically oriented researchers tend to find character disorders. They hedge toward delineation of a disease or disability syndrome. Sociologically oriented researchers tend to find disorganized families and associated evidence of poor early socialization. These emphases draw our attention away from the school, its program, and its staff. They direct us toward developmental failures.

Given the high positive intercorrelations between low educational, low occupational, and low economic attainment of parents, racial minority group membership, and marital and family disorganization, we may lump the surface attributes of the dropout together and view him as *deprived*. This concept may have relevance for theories of cognitive and emotional development (although this remains an empirical question), but it raises new difficulties. For example, the dropout is not *culturally* deprived. The standard of culture advanced by the school is but one standard among many; and in our society, schools are supposed to buttress some degree of cultural pluralism. In the same sense, social deprivation is ambiguous.

If we work with the connotation of deprivation, we make better headway. We can then conclude that the high school dropout is *educationally disadvantaged*. If he wants to live by the rules of the school game, his chances are reduced by counterpressures from his home and his environment outside school. If he is uncertain about the merits of staying in high school and graduating, his "background" and the response of educators to their own internalized assumptions about that background may reduce his ability to remove that uncertainty. In this event, the disadvantaged student is one who is vulnerable to determination from without. Finally, if he defines himself as a dropout in advance of legal age for withdrawal, this self-definition can be selectively reinforced by home, neighborhood peers, and the school itself. The dropout is educationally disadvantaged because, at any one moment, his behavioral setting includes forces that constrain him to quit school. That setting contains self, family, peers, and the school.

The survey literature supports strongly the impression that the *relation* between disadvantage (socioeconomic, ethnic, and—reciprocally—school experience) and voluntary withdrawal from school was as marked in 1928 as it was in 1958. The psychosocial correlates of withdrawal are durable as well as strong and readily identifiable. Because of this, a specious sort of timelessness enters interpretations of the dropout. The correlation coefficients remain the same; therefore, the interpretation of the meaning of disadvantage goes unchanged.

Logic and Fact

Suppose we exercise our logic and our knowledge of social trends, however. Let us assume that the proportion of economically impoverished American households has declined rather steadily since 1910, and that because of improvements in the organization of education and changes in laws affecting withdrawal, the high school dropout rate has declined just as steadily. Finally, let us assume that the correlation between economic level of the household and withdrawal from high school remains high and constant.

TABLE 1

Hypothetical Cross-Tabulation of High School Graduates and Dropouts Versus Status*

Year 1940

Status	Dropout	Graduate	Total
Low†	40	20	60
Other	0	40	40
Total	40	60	100

Year 1960

Status	Dropout	Graduate	Total
Low	25	15	40
Other	0	60	60
	25	75	100

Year 1980

Status	Dropout	Graduate	Total
Low	15	15	30
Other	0	70	70
	15	85	100

* Years chosen to illustrate changing trends in holding power of schools and in socioeconomic mobility in population. Figures reflect rates per 100.

† Taken as composite of sources of relative environmental deprivation, *e.g.*, low income, educational attainment of parents.

The data in Table 1 were invented to examine the effects of these assumptions. The logic in the results is clear. The over-all chance of being both disadvantaged economically and of dropping out *declines* from .40 in 1940, to .25 in 1960, to .15 in 1980. More intriguing and disturbing is the logical conclusion that the likelihood of graduating if one is disadvantaged declines over time. It appears that low economic status was less handicapping in 1940 than in 1960 or 1980. Twenty per cent of the disadvantaged students graduated in 1940 in contrast to 15 per cent anticipated in 1980.

The intent here is to amplify the demographic process. As the society changes economically and educationally, the dropout who is economically disadvantaged becomes a clearer object for concern. When his numbers were relatively legion, he was understandably less visible. Surely these changes in the larger context induce changes in what it means to be a dropout in each decade. As the various probabilities change, and if they change in the directions suggested by the imaginary data, the dropout will be perceived as educationally more problematic. Similarly, the high school graduate becomes less impressive. His diploma fails to command selective attention on the job market as it becomes common property.

It is in this sense that the research literature on the dropout is misplaced. Educational and psychological surveys are conducted on the one hand. Population, income, and educational statistics accumulate on the other. No one connects the individual with the society.

The literature and, therefore, the problem are fuzzily conceived in another way, too. The attributes involved in what I have summarized as a "disadvantage" are not only aspects of the same pattern of stratification; they are a circular statement of what is involved in withdrawal from school. They tell us that a socioeconomic disadvantage is the equivalent of an educational disadvantage, which is in turn productive of poor school performance, disinterest, and withdrawal.

Employment and Automation

The main key to socioeconomic advantage in our society is secure employment. Is graduation from high school a key to membership in the labor force, let alone to secure employment? A sound analysis of national survey data by the Bureau of Labor Statistics challenges the

affirmative answer offered by most commentators on the dropout question.

Keep in mind when examining Table 2 that the average national adult level of unemployment from 1959 through 1961 was about six per cent. Young adults who graduated from high school between 1955 and 1958 were generally employed by at least the fall of 1961. *White* young adults in this group achieved an employment level identical to the entire older national labor force. White young adult dropouts in the same cohort were only slightly less fortunate. About 94 per cent of the graduates, compared with 88 per cent of the dropouts in this group were employed.

to those who have the socioeconomic advantage in the first place. It has little apparent job benefit to offer the youth stigmatized through discrimination.

The data in Table 2 suggest something else. Each year, the high school graduate and the dropout both manage to find a way, however limited, into the labor force. They get jobs, although for many there is a lag between age 17 and the year of first real employment. This lag is greater for the dropout. For graduates, unemployment shakes down within three years after high school to about the level common to the entire civilian labor force. But the *major* youth problem is neither socioeconomic disadvantage nor failure

TABLE 2

Job Fates of Recent High School Graduates and Dropouts, Excluding Those Continuing School, by Color*

Year Last in School†	Per cent unemployed in 1961 (Oct.) among graduates			Year Last in School†	Per cent unemployed 1961 (Oct.) among dropouts		
	Total	White	Nonwhite		Total	White	Nonwhite
Prior to 1959	7.4	6.3	17.8	Prior to 1959	12.7	11.9	15.5**
1959	8.3	7.2	16.7	1959	17.0	16.5	18.4
1960	11.6	11.0	17.9	1960	17.2	16.1	21.4
1961	17.9	16.3	31.0**	1961	26.3	29.1	18.0

* Adapted from Jacob Schiffman (*4*), especially detailed Tables A and B.
† Data are from three-year panel survey of youths 16 to 24.
** Small-base *N* makes per cent *less* reliable in these cells.

There is an evident occupational handicap involved in dropping out, but the handicap of race, of being nonwhite, is far greater. About 12 per cent of the white *dropouts* were unemployed among those who had a few years to secure work, but nearly 18 per cent of the nonwhite *graduates* in the same age group remained unemployed. Racial "minorityship" is a correlate of socioeconomic disadvantage. Thus, a high school diploma is an economic advantage to obtain a high school diploma. *It is, rather, a steady relative breakdown in this absorption of the young noncollege graduate into the work force* as a result of the upgrading of occupational requirements through automation and the relation of this change to changes in the young adult population.

Labor Force in Flux

The net growth of the labor force from 1960 to 1970 will be about 13 million, an

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increase of more than half over the net growth from 1950 to 1960. Suppose that new jobs are generated at the pace set during the last five years. At this rate, unemployment will amount to about eight per cent of the labor force by 1970 in contrast to six per cent in 1960. Most of the increase in job seekers will be due to increases in the number of young adults entering the labor market—more than 40 per cent of the increase, at least (*1*).

The President's Advisory Committee on Labor-Management Policy reported in 1962 that,

> It is clear that unemployment has resulted from displacement due to automation and technological change. It is impossible, with presently available data, to isolate that portion of present unemployment resulting from these causes. Whether such a displacement will be short-run depends to a considerable extent on our ability to anticipate and plan for programs involving technological change and to make better use of various mechanisms for retraining and relocating workers who find themselves unneeded ... (*2*).

The absolute number of high school dropouts will remain fairly constant, even across the coming period of expansion of the young adult population, because of the increased rate of school retention. But the total number of young adults will increase so over the next decade that competition among noncollege graduates trying to enter the labor force in any capacity will prove to be more severe than in any recent period except the Great Depression. Against this backdrop, high school graduation or the failure to graduate *will not* differentiate the employed from the unemployed.[3]

[3] My argument rests on the premise of no substantial change in the rate of national economic growth. With increased growth and with extra prosperity, automation could generate new employment in the ten-year short-term as it does in any case in the long-term.

The social and educational outcomes are those of incompatible rates of change between technology and the occupational structure, or between automation (broadly conceived) and structural unemployment. The dropout rate is pertinent, but it has in fact declined steadily, while more pertinent factors have not kept pace with the change in technology.[3]

Within education, adjustment to changing rates of automation is complicated by our inability to articulate general education prior to job training with changing work requirements. Ancillary educational enterprises in adult education, vocational preparation, and career counseling have lacked fiscal support and have failed to cope adequately with the tremendous complexities inherent in massive, rapid change when they have secured support. We have only begun to learn how to "retrain" young adults from unskilled to technically skilled workers, for example.

The dimensions of reorganizing education have been well explored for years. While the discussion goes on, considerable slack is taken up outside schools by industry and government, where employers have the resources to train, to counsel, and to retrain individuals when the need for net returns dictates the importance of "classrooms in the factory" (*1*).

Central City Leverage

Is there a *root* educational task in this thicket of changes and strains, however?

[3] Among the noneducational factors in this problem, one might give first priority to insufficient economic growth, periodic recessions, imbalance in economic changes from area to area with resulting chronic distress in some localities, limitations on labor force mobility, and incompletely developed and far from adequate unemployment insurance and related social security provisions—all, of course, in relation to rapid population growth.

Can priorities be assigned, not against a moral standard but in terms of adaptations between institutions? The main root, perhaps, is the predominant response within education—increased holding power in higher education as well as in high school. The energies of the educational establishment have been invested for decades in widening the base for higher education. Thus (using the indicator of fifth grader cohorts), the rate of entry into college increased from 12 students per 100 in 1931 to 32 per 100 in 1960.

A prior task involves the residual group of youth from low status backgrounds, the dropouts and the high school graduates who do not enroll in school beyond the 12th grade. For the generation currently in elementary and secondary schools, we have little to offer here beyond remediation and retraining. Current federal proposals involve primarily only vocational training and make-work programs through updated, probably worthwhile variants on the Conservation Corps of the Great Depression.

A positive program for the noncollege and the disadvantaged group must be stronger tactically and more transformative than this effort, however. The best possible point-of-departure is the search for excellence in early instruction in *central city* schools.

The youth problem that is symbolized so superficially by the dropout issue comes to its head in the central cities. The low-income families, the rural households from the Deep South and from the distressed areas of the mountain states, the racial minorities, and the small-town families of low educational attainment—all will continue their massive relocation into the nation's biggest central cities during the next 15 years. Underemployment on the surplus of marginal farms, dwindling sources of rural nonfarm employment opportunities for unskilled workers, intensified conflict between racial groups in the South, and many other social and industrial forces continue to stimulate this old but intensifying movement.

Moreover, sociologists have recently verified their suspicion that earlier dichotomies between privileged suburban and deprived city families are breaking down as this cityward migration persists. For in addition to growing numbers of lower status families in the *outer* ring of every large city, an increasing number of disadvantaged groups are beginning to cluster at points throughout the suburban and exurban but nonfarm areas beyond the city.

Cities initiate technological change; they are also more vulnerable to its effects than are other types of communities. Increasing unemployment and the underemployment of noncollege educated youths will share in this dualism. Youth unemployment is already felt most sharply in the largest cities. The transformative capability of metropolitan communities is the ability to muster skills and to foster action. In the case of this problem, I think the main attack should be on *improvement in the quality of early general elementary education.*

As the Seeds Are Sown

It is the urban production of well educated children which constitutes the primary and, to date, most neglected challenge. Higher Horizons, Mobilization for Youth, the Ford Gray Areas Projects, and other energetic demonstrations inaugrated during the last ten years have made contributions to the salvaging of human resources. Few demonstration projects in any of our cities have been evaluated systematically; we are not sure what parts work best, how they

work, or why. But we have learned much of practical relevance about the provision of *rehabilitative* social and educational services.

What cities need most now are health, education, and welfare programs that address the exigencies of the newest generation, the one- to five-year-olds who will pour through the urban schools, agencies, clinics, and hospitals in increasing numbers during the years from 1965 to 1980. Current rates vary from city to city, but calculations from census data suggest that, on the average, the nation's 30 largest central cities now house from one in seven (for Los Angeles and San Francisco) to two in five (for New Orleans) children who are educationally disadvantaged when they enter elementary school. These are children from economically impoverished or deprived households, an increasing proportion of which are nonwhite.

The missing component in a program of preparation for social and educational accommodation to the rapid changes that lie ahead for our urban society is a platform of excellence in the first, second, and third grades. It is this platform, not later rehabilitation, that will make fluid adjustments to a changing occupational structure possible. We presently know more about the vocational rehabilitation of a disabled adult, I suspect, than we do about teaching disadvantaged children how to read or divide numbers. It is this platform of improvement of instruction in early cognitive skills that can provide the noncollege youths of the 1970s with the means for something better than a choice between a life of makework and a life of enforced idleness. We do not now *know* how to achieve this excellence. Our best energies, after all, have gone into identifying and reinforcing the gifted and into patching up the disadvantaged during adolescence.

But urban educators can come alive in response to this opportunity. The issue of early low and declining achievement among low-income children, especially Negro children, is not deep below the surface of the issue of racial imbalance. Early school learning is intimately related to problems of system organization and teacher-management conflicts, though these issues have not yet been well enough articulated.

To relate all this to the issue of the dropout: The determinants of voluntary withdrawal from high school are imbedded in the transactions between children and schools in the first years. We need an elementary system of such a caliber that the seeds of withdrawal are less and less likely to be sown in the first place. But even when we have accomplished this, we need excellence in urban elementary education of a kind that will equip the youth who stays on for a high school diploma with the cognitive skills necessary for continuous adjustment to change.

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